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**Citation for published version:**

Pospisil, J, *South Sudan - Deadlock Prolonged*, 2015, Web publication/site, Political Settlements Research Programme. <<http://www.politicalsettlements.org/2015/08/17/south-sudan/>>

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South Sudan – Deadlock Prolonged

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**Jan Pospisil, Research Fellow with the Political Settlements Research Programme, discusses current attempts to reach settlement in South Sudan**

The current attempt to renegotiate a South Sudan elite bargain – previously known as the so-called “big tent” – by the regional organisation IGAD, seems doomed to fail. The final negotiation effort towards the internationally agreed deadline on August 17<sup>th</sup> almost immediately faced severe setbacks, with South Sudanese President Salva Kiir unexpectedly not attending, and the opposition forces more concerned with negotiating their own unity due to recent splits by leading commanders.

IGAD has recently increased its efforts in the mediation process in the aftermath of the visit of Barack Obama to Kenya and Ethiopia, teaming up with all major international players in the so-called “IGAD plus” format. The agreement proposed by the mediators, however, was met with severe criticism, from the negotiating parties – the rebels already proposed to

remove the deadline – as well as from observers from think tanks and civil society (<http://www.suddinstitute.org/publications/show/the-compromise-on-resolving-south-sudan-s-conflict-how-igad-s-new-peace-offer-is-unsustainable/>). The idea to be as encompassing as possible obviously was not the way to go in the current situation, and the attempt of inclusivity seemed to be superficial: a recent ICG report (<http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/africa/horn-of-africa/south-sudan/228-south-sudan-keeping-faith-with-the-igad-peace-process.aspx>) even cites an interview revealing that participating chiefs had been selected on the sole criterion of who was willing to board the plane to Addis.

The pressing question now is no longer why another agreement or mediation with regard to South Sudan seems set to fail, but why the international players are caught in the same treadmill for years. I would suspect that three widely held, but still wrong assumptions on South Sudan are responsible:

- *The war is irrational and is hurting all parties in the end:* Certainly, the war is hurting the country and its population as badly as one could think, however, such reasoning unfortunately is not the logic South Sudanese politics is following. All parties have something to gain in the current situation – President Kiir has no need to share his exclusive grip on the country's resource base; Riek Machar, his main armed contender, retains his place on the regional on international landscape by pursuing the war; and, to make matters worse, tremendous opportunities are opening up for other factions – as demonstrated by the recent defections of leading generals of the opposition forces.
- *There is a genuine interest to build up the country:* Obviously this is not the case. Although hard to understand for the Western donor community, the present elite generation is more interested in generating revenue after long years of hardship in the bush. Violent infighting about “who gets what (<http://www.cartoonmovement.com/icomix/73>)” is part of this process.
- *The unification of the SPLM/A will solve the process:* This assumption is particularly popular within the region, with the so-called “Arusha process” for party unification already in place. However, there is one significant shortcoming in this idea: a unified SPLM/A focusing on national rebuilding is without historic precedent. The SPLA was always a loose, strongly factionalised organisation, with hybrid ideological underpinnings covering the whole spectrum from independence over whole-of-Sudan-solutions (Garang's “New Sudan” vision) to narrow ethnic interests.

Hence, even if a renewed political settlement of the elite actors could be brokered, it indeed would be, as Jok Madut Jok (<http://www.suddinstitute.org/publications/show/national-reconciliation-in-south-sudan-how-to-translate-political-settlements-into-peace-in-the-coun/>) argues, far beyond any kind of legitimacy. The current modalities of elite accommodation need to be unsettled, and here international pressure – however severe and harsh it might be (<http://enoughproject.org/reports/beyond-deadlock-recommendations-obama%E2%80%99s-plan-b-south-sudan>) – is a problematic stick to use. The “unsettling” of the modalities of elite accommodation that is required, is first and foremost a national and very local affair. International actors have a role to play, however. International legitimacy is an issue and a trade bait not to be underestimated.

Given that the almost habitually accepted trade-off between short-stability maintenance and long-term necessities has not paid off at all, any future international partnering with a SPLM-ruled government – in whatever form it may present itself – has to be in question. This requires sensible involvement, particularly on the political level, where a double-transformation of the political settlement – out of violence, and out of the SPLM as the sole political arena – has to take place. It also requires that the common practice of indirectly subsidising the current regime with humanitarian aid has to be reconsidered.

For international partners, working on a legitimate political settlement in South Sudan thus involves both more and less politicised collaboration at the same time.

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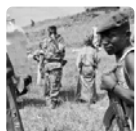

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